

INTO THIS WORLD - SING A NEW SONG

Advent

Isaiah 42:9-12

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Isaiah 42:9-12¹

See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.
Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.
Let them give glory to the Lord,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

PRAYER

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.
How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.
I would be silent now and expect it,
So that I, so that you, so that we
Might receive the gift that we need,
So that we might be, indeed, the gift others need.
How silently the gift is given.

Let's take a moment to be silent together.

The Light comes into the world to draw us back to this quiet place,
so that we can hear the song and remember the song
that you have been waiting all of this time until now
to sing in us and through our lives.
Together we pray. – Amen.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989

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"Behold, I am doing a new thing," the prophet Isaiah says.
Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?
"Behold, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it."

After 39 chapters – 39 long chapters in the prophecy of Isaiah – 39 long chapters of judgment and condemnation, a new thing breaks out. After 39 chapters – or is that 39 years in exile? – something new happens. After 39 chapters or 39 years, something new breaks out to a people in exile, who have been making their home in a far place from home, in a distant land from their neighbors, from their selves, from their memory, a word comes to people in exile. After 39 chapters or 39 years or perhaps that's just another way of saying it's been a lifetime. It's been a lifetime of the people. Maybe you and me living on horizons within that we are drawn too close. Living and making our comfort in silenced places of sadness and despair and stuckness. After 39 chapters in 39 years or perhaps, yes, a lifetime until this very moment perhaps, this very moment for you and for me – for us – a new thing happens and a song is heard. The 40th chapter of Isaiah begins with three little notes:

♪♪ Comfort ye.

Three little notes. Three little notes that you could begin an aria with, or a symphony, a cantata. You could make *something* happen. Three little notes, after all of this time:

♪♪ Comfort ye.

Now, the despairing among us, we know. "How can you sing? How can you *dare sing* a new song in a time like this, with a grief like this, with a pain like this? How dare you sing? And the cynics among us – or maybe they're the realists – say, "There *is* nothing new under the sun." But the poet sings over the despair and over the crisis and over the cynicism and sings out,

♪♪ Comfort ye.

And some people – perhaps some people remember those three notes, and they've heard them sometime, maybe a long time ago. And *some* of them *perhaps* join in and sing along,

♪♪ Comfort ye.

♪♪ Comfort ye.

And some people out here are a little uncertain about this strange thing happening wonder and they say, "Oh, what the heck," and they join along and they hear the three notes,

♪♪ Comfort ye.

And some people who are sitting there quietly in the pews, a little uncertain and a little uncomfortable, whether this is really a song for them and whether this acceptance is really for them whether this song could be for them, they too risk and they join in and we all sing

♪♪ Comfort ye.

And a new thing begins.

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Alice Walker said once that poetry is my only weapon. *Poetry* is my only weapon. And *Isaiah* is that kind of a poet. Isaiah makes words into chisels and hammers that hammer us awake out of our stuckness and out of our lostness, out of our safe homes that we have made in exile. Isaiah is that kind of a poet who makes out of words watercolors and visions, who makes us despite ourselves look up and look out and see something beyond all of that swirl and lostness we feel within. Isaiah is *that* kind of a prophet, *that* kind of a poet, *that* kind of a song leader who opens up to us a new and distant land that we have given up believing could be for us.

♪♪ Comfort ye.

♪♪ Comfort ye.

And the poet sings out and sings to you and sings to me.

And Isaiah says that the one who brings this new song, this unexpected song, this song seemingly out of nowhere is called a "servant". A *servant*! A servant without a name, without a gender, but a *servant* who comes and leads us in song. Well, who is this servant? Well, some people say it's Israel, and some people say it's Jesus. And some people say maybe it's you, maybe it's me, maybe it's any of us who dare to step in and sing the new song and the unexpected song in a time of cynicism and despair.

Who is this servant? The servant is anybody who steps forth into that place of risk and vulnerability that only place where anything worth happening can happen. And the servant sings out. And people hear the song. They've been hearing the song for thousands of years, and suddenly they find themselves doing what they couldn't have imagined doing: joining and singing a song. Or stepping forth out of their comfortability into discomfort. For this song of comfort that Isaiah brings is not that warm wool blanket kind of comfort – though... We all know there is a place and there is a time for wool-blanket comfort. But this is not the kind of comfort that Isaiah brings. It brings a comfort of groundedness big enough and bold enough and daring enough to risk us stepping into our *dis*comfort, stepping out into what we have never done before, considered before, thought before, to raise up our eyes and see something different, to see someone different.

But the good news is this. The song doesn't depend upon you or me to create it, to know it, to imagine it, but merely to step into it. For Isaiah says the song is already here. It *permeates* everything that is here – even you and even me. The seas have got it. Puget Sound's got it already. Lake Washington, it's got it. Even little Lake Union, it's got it. The beaches have got it. Matthews Beach has got it. Alki Beach has already got it. The little towns in Podunkville, in Eastern Washington, the towns that nobody's ever heard of, they've already got it. The desert has got it. And something in you has got it already.

But we need to be invited to offer the gift. We need to be ready to receive the offering of the song that calls us into a place we could never imagine being again: a place of hope, a place of courage and a place of strength, and a place of connection.

The man with the torn trousers and the cardboard sign at his dusty work boots stands outside the bookshop hawking poems. "Good poems! Bad poems! Anybody want a poem?" he calls out. "Love

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poems," for the couple walking by, hand in hand. "Baseball poems, how about, for the woman in her ball cap there." And "Happy poems," for the woman and her daughter in the pink frilly dress skipping into the bookshop. He's a born hustler. In another place and another time he'd be making a killing at the bazaar selling rugs, enticing us in, inviting us in – fortunate customers that we might be – into the back room to share a cup of tea and to hear a poem and a story around the hookah. But *we* are not that kind of place. And, besides, he doesn't got any rugs. He's not *quite* our style. He's a little too in-your-face. He's not quite our type here in Seattle, where we prefer our poems in chat books that we can read in the privacy of our own homes with a good cold glass of red wine – not poems that are spewed out on the street for everybody to hear, not poems spewed out by a man in torn trousers and a cardboard sign at his feet.

I walk out of the bookshop, my book tightly held against me, cringing as I go out, trying to slip by him unnoticed – when *he* calls out to me, "Hey! Chicago Marathon!² How about a poem?" "Thank you," I say. Thank you? Thank you? – and walk on by. . . . And walk on by.

I stand there, unlocking my bike and putting on my helmet and hearing him hawk the only wares he's got. And I think what kind of a poem do I want to make today? What kind of a song do I want to sing today? What kind of a poem do *you* want to make today? What kind of a poem do *you* want to sing today? I think, what kind of poem will I write – if I jump on my bike and go on home? Or what kind of poem will I write, what kind of song will I hear if I walk on over and lean against my bicycle and say, "I'm here looking for a poem. I'm here looking for a new song today."

And Anthony's cracked and chiseled face breaks forth in a great smile. And his dark eyes twirl in the memory of rhythm and beat. He draws forth a cadence, a cacophony of texture and sound and word. Eh. Is it just my imagination? Or is the whole world stopped to listen in? I mean, the passers-by stopping and turning and staring. I mean the traffic stilled. I mean the birds quieted. I mean the bookshop doors open wide, singing the song that Anthony has been waiting all this time until now to sing, hearing the song that I have been waiting a lifetime to hear.

UCUCC: PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/12/28/2016

² Paster Peter likes to run marathons.